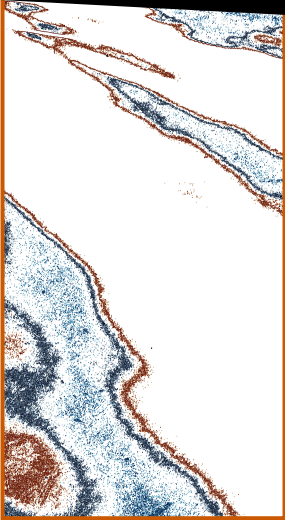



between

PEPPERBALL GUNS

and

CONSPIRACIST STUNTS

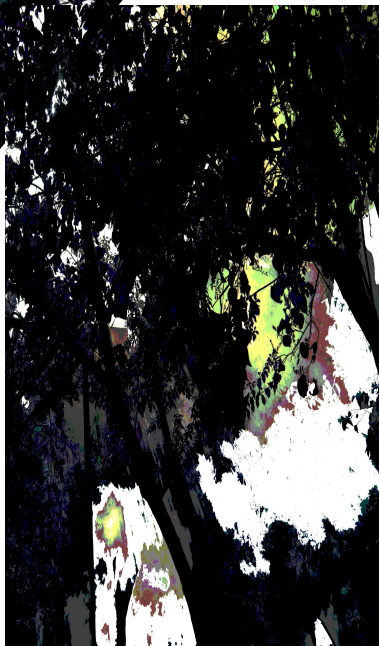
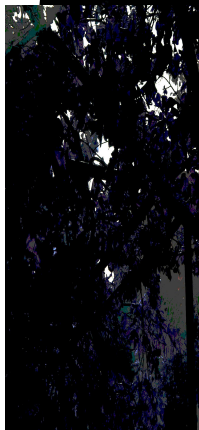


A couple of anarchists in Narm
reflecting on anti-lockdown protests,
state authority and liberal morality.

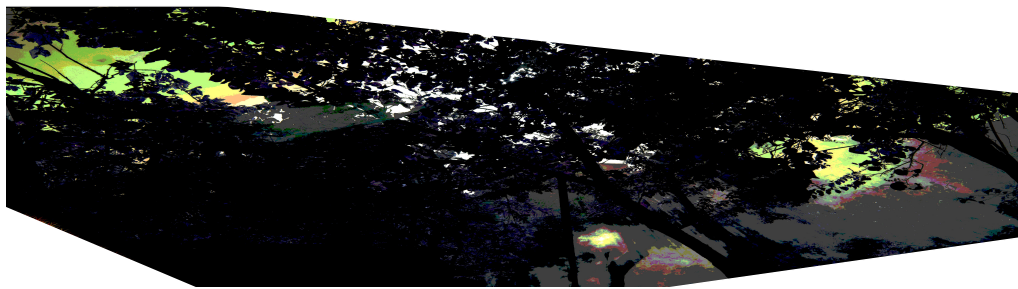


**From the colonised territory of
so-called australia.**

Stolen land, never ceded.



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Spring 2021

We're both here in Narrm, writing from the middle of a pandemic, trying to make sense of what takes place around us. Two anarchists in a city that has been under state-enforced lockdown longer than any other in the world. That word – anarchist – will take on different tones and disparate meanings and neither of us feel attached to it in a dogmatic way. Certainly, our anarchism does not necessarily always align with many others in this town. It does not always align with each other either.

A crucial commonality is that we despise the authority of the State and the police over our lives. We seek forms of resistance beyond that authority, extending care and solidarity outside of its limiting confines. We recognise the difficulties of making this move within the current context. Yet, even within a pandemic – where looking after each other's health is the necessary condition – we reject simply falling under the State's protection or allowing it to determine the best course of action for 'public health'. We distrust the outcomes of where allowing such control will lead.

As part of this anti-authoritarian, anarchism we are also necessarily anti-fascist. And so we are wary of any openings that the far-right might exploit to increase their street presence. While we think there is potentially something interesting going on in the anti-lockdown movement's refusal of state authority, we are worried about how conspiracy theories are pathways to fascist ideas. At the same time, we reject the dead-end of liberal morality and the political frameworks that it provides.

These two pieces were written separately, but they reflect our attempts to engage with the confusing mess of the anti-lockdown movement – to find a path between state enforcement and fascist activity. Sorting through what is happening around us with any clarity is difficult – maybe clarity isn't necessary, anyways? – and this has been exacerbated by our separation from each other, from the impossibility of the collective spaces from which we usually chat, plot and act. Still we hope our perspectives here might have some resonance for others.



INCONSPICUOUS CONSPIRACISTS & WILEY PIGS

observations from a lockdown protest

prelude

this piece was written coming out of lockdown about a year ago. still unpublished, i took a moment to wonder if it was still relevant here in spring 2021, as we lurk outside the doors of mass vaccination. observing the recent fury of the anti-lockdown mob, and the puritanism of the left, it seemed mostly what had changed in that regard was the anti-lockdownists had gotten bigger and more punchy, and the left had gotten more moral. also the cops had gotten stuck into their stash of previously unused weapons (and we all know who'll be wearing the next round of pepperballs). the trajectory is almost tragically predictable, but things have changed. and many on the left have rolled up their proverbial sleeves these last few weeks - credit where credits due. some great analyses and discussions about ways forward, and a re-focus on that authoritarian problem that we avoided tending to as it smoked away on the back burner.

we all really let this get a bit out of hand.

attempt at an anarchist position

we refuse to be backed into a simple corner of either embracing or condemning dan andrews. the 'progressives' say the government and the police are here to protect us, as if they have our best interests at heart. the right wingers say dan andrews has a communist agenda, or that the whole pandemic is a secret plot. we reject 'both sides' as dangerous fantasy. our situation is much more complicated than this. being against the police state does not naturally lead to a denial of science, just as accepting the reality of the

pandemic does not naturally lead to an embrace of authoritarian control. and so some of us find ourselves outside of the commonly accepted range of possible positions.

the shrine

i went to a anti-lockdown rally in narrm, so-called melbourne, mid september. i saw a great shit show of methy bogan nazis from melton, suave fascists from the inner south, yoga yuppies, festive hippies and deep Q conspiracy theorists. no surprises there. i also saw a bunch more people who i couldnt pigeon-hole. figuring out the demographic of this rally and what their points of affinity were proved really tricky. before anyone freaks out too hard, i should say i was there with some friends to observe, rather than 'participate'. the crowd looked pretty covid-y so, aside from a couple of accidental close calls with the cops we kept a pretty safe distance.

when we arrived at the shrine there were pigs everywhere. also a fairly decent turn out of protesters, maybe a few hundred milling around near the front and many semi-participants/semi on-lookers. quite a porous affair. there was even one guy who just pretended he was jogging, on the spot, the whole time. the protesters seemed to want to be at the shrine and theres some symbolic political reason for this that i never totally figured out. i should have read the event discription. we overhear some people talking about the diggers. maybe something like the diggers fought for our freedom so lets go and resurrect their spirit at the shrine, or something like this. and a righteous rage that the legacy of the diggers had been disrespected and debased by the lockdown. in terms of figuring out whether or not im at a fascist rally, this point is pretty suspect, obviously. anyone asserting violence in the name of a fake state on stolen land is a joker and doesnt know shit about freedom. and if those people are the reference point for freedom, well...anyway the pigs set up a line with their backs to the shrine, facing the protesters, and i really thought it was going to kick off here. somehow it didnt. everybody shouted 'freedom! freedom!' the cops shoved people down the stairs and into the park, a few people seemed to get arrested for holding banners.

the march

then they started moving. the march was undpredictable, im assuming, because the majority of the crowd were not seasoned protesters. it hadnt occured to them theyre supposed to start at the library and finish at parliament. so after some fairly succinct discussion they just sort of set off, on the footpaths towards albert park. id never before set foot inside albert park. my fuck is it massive and just crawling with yuppies. as our circus moved around the lake the pigs were nowhere to be seen which seemed odd to us. had they been outsmarted? or were they laying an invisible trap? or had they just abandoned it? very strange. Eventually, round the south-east end of the lake, the protesters started shouting at each other up the street 'back to the shrine!' and gesturing

wildly (i was reminded of the 'back to the pile' bit from an old episode of south park.) we followed along and brought up the rear so we couldnt really see what happened next - we presume cops - but at some point the protest doubled back and headed again to that south end of albert park. this is when shit got a bit real for them. i would almost say they got ambushed, sort of kettled and beaten. heaps of arrests. one hippie stripped down and jumped in the lake. a few lads tried to run and dodge cops and got brutally gang tackled. one guy just let loose with a flurry of fists, surrounded by cops, as if he was being dragged out of a pub. he looked unsavoury as fuck and i dont ever want to be in the same room as him, but i had to admire his sheer dogged ACAB enthusiasm. there were many arrests at the end there and it was hard to determine whether the cops were targetting particular organisers, or the unmasked, or just grabbing as many people as they could.

we walked away at the end of the day as confused as ever. the organisers id say are highly suspect, but the masses? not so sure. is this fundamentally different to a 'reclaim australia' rally? the far right are known for weaponising political ambiguity. yes we need to understand it to figure out how to approach it, but leaving it because its complicated seems counter-intuitive to me.

the left

the left broadly responded to the recent protests by basically pointing and laughing. fair to a degree, but its become clear that conspiracy theories are less benign than we all thought in the past. considering that, we should probably be observing with some concern. what i mean to say is the fascists have a lot of space to soak up all the anti-authoritarian spirit thats in the streets right now. if 'regular' people are showing up to rallies during the lockdown, they are already radicals in a sense, but they're not necessarily wedded to the far-right. i dont see these people as ripe for us to 'recruit' or some trotty shit like this, but i do think theyre ripe, and if our answer to their anger is a moralising 'shut up and stay at home' well, we're just leaving them hanging for the fash.

some half-baked maxims for banners never painted

while science may provide solutions for the virus, it cannot solve the pandemic of authoritarianism;

while it is not natural or inevitable to respond to a public health crisis with extreme policing, it is a predictable step in the logic of the penal colony; it is not separate from hundreds of years of white supremacy and the illegal occupation of this land; it is not distinct from paranoid and racist border policing;

the bureaucratic and policing procedures and culture of this time will not simply disappear when the health crisis subside, nor did they come out of the blue;



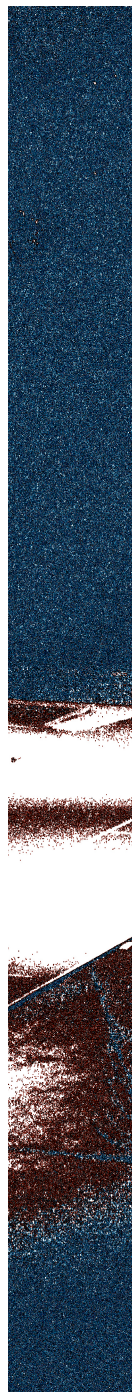
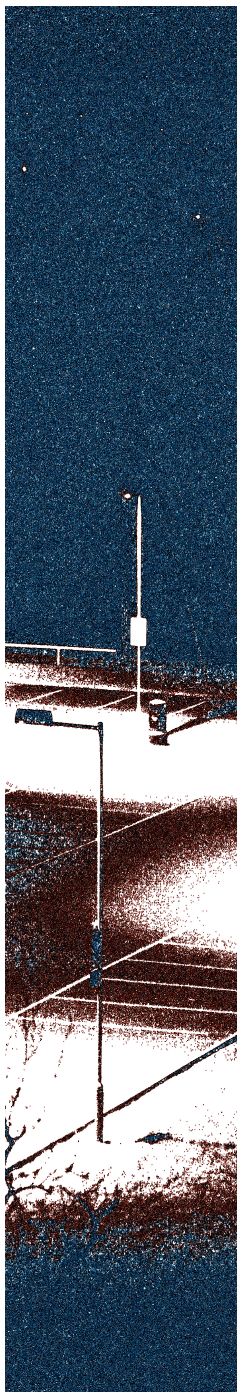
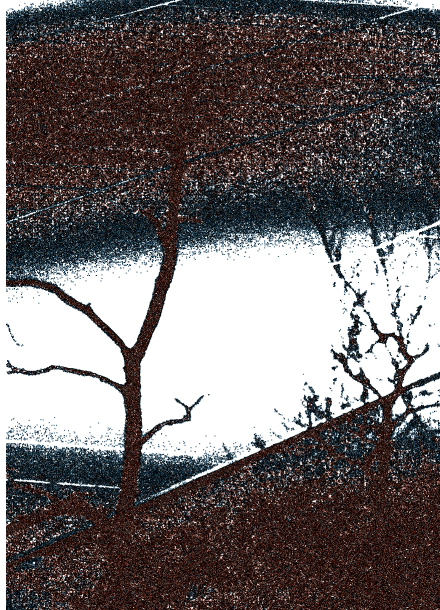
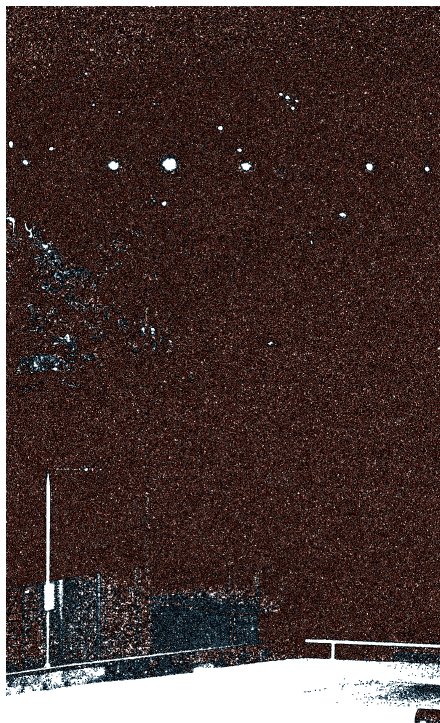
the 'law and order' that we are seeing right now in narm is not so specific to this moment. it enunciates the past as it does the future;

conspiracy

we could say they conspire to make the most of an opportunity, but this may be shifting the popular definition of conspiracy. while we have no trust for the government and its institutions - in fact it is our lifes work to rid ourselves of them - we cant see the worth in creating wild theories about shady cabals. there is simply no need. those in power do their worst work in broad daylight. what we need is to develop our understanding of why they act in particular ways, how their actions reflect their agenda. connecting the past to the present to the future. in criticising their policies we dont need to let dark fantasy creep in, just to ask the questions that are wide open, in the fresh air: why the fuck do they exist in the first place? and what are we going to do about it?

opportunity

forgive the old platitude, but every crisis is an opportunity! and as i lean out my window, back into the street, contemplating all that could have been, the possibilities seem more obvious than ever. an anti-lockdown rally is an opportunity to dialogue with those who loathe authority for their own reasons; or perhaps its simply a call for some good old fashioned antifa; those same rallies provide an opportunity to create our own autonomous disruptions, in locations of our choosing, away from the concentrations of pigs; the mandatory face masks flip our old problem of banned disguises, on its head. sick; in certain quarters, far from dans cheersquad, hatred of police and politicians is rife - this should be generalised. and i have to remind myself there are no missed opportunities, only lessons for the future.



DISQUIETING ABSENCES

(about movements that make no sense)

(Disclaimer: This piece was mostly written before the anti-lockdown/ anti vaccine mandate protests that broke out in Narm on Monday, September 20th, 2021. While those protests added extra layers of complexity, I am still good putting the ideas contained here forward as being relevant to the whole mess we're in. From: darknessoutside.home.blog)

slowness

Another lockdown drags its weight through the winter and into spring, embellishing hours into days and days into weeks. I endure time by going for runs, strumming my bass, reading, writing, cooking. Materially comfortable enough for now. Missing those I love. Staying close to the few I love that I'm able to. Sometimes bored, sometimes worried. Just passing time.

There's another post saying not to complain about lockdowns because there's people in jail or in detention centers or dying. I half nod, caught out by the instinctive call and response posture. Then I shrug. There's always the guilt of someone worse off. These words are emptied of meaning precisely because of their transcendent righteousness.

Their emptiness is a mirror of the baffling mess that they critique – the anti-lockdown demonstrations. Whereas the righteous words sit in a hollowness of their own creation, of being so *correct* that they (seek to) leave no space for any other feeling, the protests are all feeling at their core with little interest in the sense they make or in being able to grasp something that holds true. And so we have a constellation of narratives seeking to unearth the greatest conspiracies, possibly entertaining if not for the darker endpoints they often lurch towards.

Does this mean we should abandon every one of those feelings that pre-empt anti-lockdown mobilisations? Why are desires for liberation being derided as selfish with finger-wagging moralism from so many on the Left? Who is this 'we' I reference? What affinities hold us together and in times of crisis do we have to accept the tenuousness of our positions, that cracks may appear when placed under duress, that new alliances and compositions of struggle may catch all of us unaware?

one year and a half ago

COVID-19 entered our lives at once like a creeping pall, slowly encroaching from faraway, yet at the same time moving upon us so quickly relative to the flow of those lives – a matter of months from Wuhan to being in these streets. Between these two conflicting relations to the passing of time came a kind of cognitive disjointedness that occurs when the news that we follow closely, but that remains at a distance, suddenly appears as a visceral part of our day-to-day existence.

We scrambled to respond with networks of mutual aid and support, attempting to find space between the threat of the virus and the control of the State to extend collective care. But as the reality of the pandemic extended to shroud all the foreseeable future these efforts mostly withdrew. The truth is, it's felt like even more ordinary check-ins and acts of sharing have diminished as lock-downs have proved ongoing.

We still do our best to stay in touch with friends, to not lose the varied influences of brilliant, difficult, chaotic people on our lives. We try to remember who might be doing it tough – and realise that's an ever-growing number. I sporadically send out unwieldy messages in an attempt to reach out and then feel anxious about how they might land, whether they're unwanted intrusions or, if responded too, what exactly I can follow through on.

This devolvement reflects a continued sense of uncertainty and weariness about the present that we occupy. The cadence of now is washed out and choppy, making it hard to find a rhythm that we can grasp onto. Are we simply holding time until a return to some kind of prior normal? This increasingly feels unlikely – even if this virus is brought under some kind of control there are all sorts of implications for what resistance can look like, for how the measures the State has now practised as a response to crisis have become 'normality'.

on /off streets

Meanwhile, it has been with a sense of bewilderment that I observe a movement that ruptures that 'normality' take its place on the streets of the city I reside in – while I stay enclosed in my room with no real thought to participate. At times these protests have started to look and feel like scenes from dystopian movies. Of course, not all movements

that take to the streets deserve support or participation. There are reasons to be wary, to raise warnings about the potential of anti-lockdown mobilisations being a funnel to the far-right.

I understand some of the reasons why the political milieus I'm most connected to have abandoned the streets. I recognise the imperative of cautious separation for the sake of looking after each other during a pandemic. And, in general, I'm far less concerned with prioritising being on the street at all costs than many – I don't think the endless cycle of repetitive rallies marching the same routes while corralled by marshals and the police builds the sort of militant, political culture I hope for.

Still, there has been a too easy, almost grateful retreat to online forums from many around me. Is there a point where this necessity has gone beyond that – necessity – and become a preference? The plethora of meetings, forums, discussions, fundraisers and even protests that occur in the digital realm suggests more than a functional, stop-gap measure. Is it possible to contort and re-align ourselves too far so that we're all bent out of shape, jammed into physical, digital or categorical boxes that we were never meant to fit into? Adaptive preferences can reshape the world, limiting the perception of horizons. They can make the realm of what's possible shrink as we adapt to what we're forced to accept.

The abandonment of the anti-lockdown movement hasn't only been about not being physically present. What is unnerving are the takes that begin to look like siding with State control, that function from the basis of an incomplete (and boring) narrative that ends with moralistic finger-pointing and dualisms of good/ bad or fascist/ anti-fascist. It feels more than ever like the uncertainties of this time should be too complex to resort to basic binaries. In a pandemic world, where so much has changed, it should be possible to allow for the sense of confusion that has manifested in people taking to the streets (and fighting the police), in ways that do not fall within the lines of known political positions. It should also be possible to ascertain that the force of legitimacy that the police have been handed – not to mention the use of new crowd control weaponry – continues to be the most authoritarian trajectory that exists in front of us.

The forms of opposition to the lockdown cannot be made easy sense of. It seemingly contains aspects that run the spectrum from those that I might find it possible to support all the way to their negative corollary that I am fearful of: anti-State control alongside Australian flags; significant numbers of BIPOC alongside known far-right activists; distrust of authority flowing into anti-semitic conspiracies; people struggling to pay rent alongside landlords and bosses desperate to open up for the sake of capitalist continuity; an openness to non-western forms of knowledge alongside cooked white people co-opting the bits that are convenient to them while insisting vaccinations have been implanted with micro-chips to control us.

It's a mess. But the world is messy and I prefer it that way. Or, at least, I think it's necessary to engage with the mess.

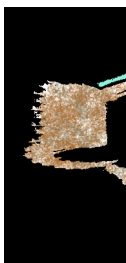
becoming institutionalised

I bristle when I hear the criticism that a 'lack of demands' proves the inherent emptiness of meaning or intent at the core of a protest. I remember it levelled against the counter-summit, anti-capitalist movement that existed at the turn of the century. Some of the Left have used this charge against uprisings that they couldn't make sense of, let alone control: the French banlieue riots of 2005, the UK riots of 2011 and the Ferguson insurrection of 2014.

Those making this accusation tend to claim a lack of demands shows the participants to be some combination of politically illiterate, morally empty, immature, selfish, overly-emotional and irrational. On the surface, some of these descriptions have seemed apt for what we've seen of the anti-lockdown protests. I'm not here to deny that as an immediate perception even while considering what else lies beneath. In any case, I'm more interested in what such accusations might say about those making them, especially when they seem to be regularly coming from perspectives I otherwise expect to have affinity with.

Maybe it confirms an uneasy suspicion about how 'the Left' is anchored to the liberal political order, choosing alliances under the veneer of progressivism even while the further radical potential of those are a dead end. Here in Narm, it's almost impossible to not be drawn into the trappings that the institutionalisation of progressivism offers. There's funding for projects, arts grants, employment, spaces to use, services and a series of other hard-to-pin-down niceties that make for a comfortable life. I've certainly felt the pull and the malaise that results.

Part of that comfort involves becoming conditioned to expect the forms of 'safety' that are produced by the State leading to ideas of liberation that look less like abolishing or escaping State control and instead focus on including more people within its protective embrace. In doing so, attempts at 'radical' politics remain entrenched in deep cyclical conversations with the State, where the very act of 'being in conversation with' reinforces the legitimacy and dominant position of the colonial, capitalist order. The expectation of demands as proof of political coherence circles back on itself, ensuring that 'politics' is expressed within a framework that makes sense within terms defined and established by the dominant social order. The trap has been laid and it's difficult to break free from.



There is also an obvious hypocrisy in criticisms pointing out how the anti-lockdown movement's lack of demands signals its disinterest in extending solidarity to other marginalised people. While it might be possible to deride the narrow self-interest that motivates those mobilisations, it's impossible to avoid how other forms of collective 'safety' being promoted are predicated on enclosure and exclusion. That is, tacit support for ongoing, state-enforced lockdowns *is* invested in the capacity for secure border protection that this island nation has perfected through a history of racist paranoia.

It makes me fretful, floating through silent spaces where we no longer speak of abolishing borders or consider resistance and care to extend beyond nationalisms. Similarly, I accept the necessity of the vaccine but can't countenance it as some kind of social good when the cost of being safely vaccinated here is the lack of access to vaccinations in other parts of the world – the same parts of the world who have always had the least access.

The issue here isn't about perfecting demands – no set of demands can capture a totality of solidarity and it is disingenuous to suggest otherwise. It's about accepting ambiguity and contradiction while doing our best to hold on to the ethics that ground us, as well as the connections to others that challenge us, preventing the dogmatic certainty that fuels a desire to claim how everyone else is doing it wrong. The issue is about allowing things to not make sense, recognising that politics never arrives fully-formed – in fact, that any pretense to a fully-formed version of politics should be met with distrust.

ir /rational

The currents of resistance that have most inspired me have always exceeded the bounds of hegemonic, political rationality. Their desire to escape the State's control, forces of oppression and methods of colonisation and containment have been deemed irrational precisely due to their rejection of the normative constraints of political discourse. In so many instances these struggles are grounded in forms of knowledge, mysticism and spirituality that cannot be understood within the frameworks of western liberalism or scientific rationality.

It's there in Indigenous resistance on this continent from 1788 to now; in the role of 'voodoo' in the revolt of slaves that became the Haitian revolution; in slave revolts all across the USA; in the Ghost Dance and the anti-colonial resistance of the Oceti Sakowin Federation in the late 1800's to Sioux attempts to vanquish the black snake at Standing Rock recently; in the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas; in the centuries of Irish rebellion against British rule; in the Mau Mau uprising against British rule; in the Boxer Rebellion; in the Algerian revolution; in the European peasant revolts of the middle-ages, especially women holding onto their knowledge in the face of witch-hunts, the Inquisition and enclosure; in countless, many more.

I do not draw any direct line between the struggles that I have named above and the liberatory potential of the anti-lockdown movement. I don't have much hope invested at all in the anti-lockdown movement. I see the reactionary sentiments and understand

the dangerous turns those can take. I *am* making a point about the histories that are discredited by clinging to notions of rationality based entirely in the institutions of liberal democracy and western, colonialist knowledge when speaking of radical potential.

In Martinique a vaccination centre was burned to the ground. It came as massive union-called protests against mandatory vaccinations turned into riots. It was an act steeped in the history of resistance to French colonialism (this is the birthplace of Fanon after all), in distrust of the colonial state's enforcement of public health measures with the knowledge that nearly the entire population has been poisoned by the use of pesticides for banana plantations controlled by French capitalists.

There is not a neat separation between medical expertise and the forms of control that capitalism and colonialism have inflicted upon marginalised populations for centuries. It would be preferable to simply take the benefits of medical science as beyond the reach of the political and social forces that shape the world. But that isn't true and the fact of the pandemic and the fear of a highly contagious virus cannot simply lead to relinquishing this understanding. That doesn't mean we have to discard all those benefits, but it should allow for an open-ness to the many reasons that people are hesitant or distrustful.

Public health measures necessarily expand beyond that which is directly medical, into the terrain of the social and economic. They are not a neutral zone of 'good' because they are concerned with health, they are a contested zone of conflict and struggle involving diverse forms of social coercion. The realm of biopolitical control is asserted as necessarily totalising *for our safety* and as *the only way* to respond to the pandemic. It is administered through the legal, medical, bureaucratic and violent arms of the State. In this context, slogans like "trust the experts" or "back the science" have as many – maybe more – potential reactionary outcomes as paths towards a greater social good.

Without self-organised communities extending care *and* resisting the unceasing implementation of a biopolitical regime, its assumed neutral, legitimacy will bleed into the future as we face further crises, including the climate catastrophe. The forms of life it produces will be surveilled, policed, confined, categorised and digitised, shaping a social terrain centred on being able to most securely manage dangers that arise, focusing on statistical models as predictive of future threats. The state and capital are quite capable and happy to structure a society where we're restricted to easily manageable units, kept in separated zones, from which we work and consume. Less chance of messy, spontaneous outbreaks of the masses coming together, spilling over, being uncontrollable and therefore dangerous.

uncertainty

I return to a question I asked at the beginning of the pandemic: what if the most effective response to the pandemic (or any crisis) is the most technocratic, authoritarian one? Does liberal moralism expect us to be good with that? And what of all the other struggles and aspirations for liberation when that is the case? Do we simply forego them?

It doesn't easily align with what I have known of the world that desires for freedom from state control and distrust of authority have come to be associated as reactionary or right-wing positions. It has come to this because of the inadequacies in our capacity to step outside the comfort of state provisions and take the risks necessary to build any kind of power beyond its reach.

The anti-lockdown movement doesn't have that sort of power either. Not yet, at least. What it does have is a fearless and loose randomness – without so many pre-established, formalised ways of relating to the State – that makes it leak out beyond what can be easily contained. This looseness could get ugly – maybe it already has – but it also stands in stark contrast to the rigid posture of so many declaring with all-knowing certainty what is what, who is what, what is fascist, who is right-wing, what is irrational, what must be done to 'build a movement'.

This all leaves me feeling disoriented, like my mapping is out-of-wack. This is partially due to separation, with not being able to have the regular conversations with friends that help make sense of things. But I also remember that it might be necessary to leave known terrain if we're to stumble upon revolutionary possibility. That we might have to be open to presumed affinities cracking under the strain of out of the ordinary conditions, just as new ones form.

texts

The online version of this article has links within the text. These are some of them:

melbourneactivistlegal.org.au for their statement 'Police use of projectile weapons' during anti-lockdown protests

<https://illwill.com/immunitarian-democracy> an excellent article about immunity, enclosure and exclusion

<https://crimethinc.com/2015/05/05/feature-why-we-dont-make-demands> for a critique of demands

Our History is the Future (book) by Nick Estes for more about the Ghost Dance and Sioux resistance at Standing Rock.

www.telesurenglish.net (news) for the story 'Martinicans protest against compulsory COVID-19 vaccination' and <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-54992051> (news) for the poisoning of Martinique's population with pesticides.

smh.com.au (news) for the story 'Australia dipped into COVID Pfizer stockpile intended for poor nations'.

pantograph-punch.com for the article 'Dear epidemiology: a letter from two Maori researchers' about medical science within the context of colonisation.

Terror Incognita (zine) about leaving known terrain and breaking from liberal consensus. PDF available online.
